Cochran Says GOP Senators Unlikely to Remove Hatfield From Chairmanship

By Helen Dewar
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Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Republican Conference, said yesterday that he doubts GOP senators will remove Sen. Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) as chairman of the Appropriations Committee because of his vote last week against the proposed balanced budget constitutional amendment.

Cochran said research done by his staff showed that no Republican senator in this century had been ousted from a committee chairmanship solely because of a vote on legislation and added, "I doubt if the votes are there to remove him [Hatfield] as chairman."

Cochran's assessment came as an aide to Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.) said Mack, Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) and others are preparing a letter "seeking a discussion of Hatfield" to be submitted today to the Senate Republican leadership.

Others said the letter will be signed by at least five senators, the minimum number required to force a meeting of the conference, which is composed of all Republican senators and could strip Hatfield of his chairmanship if it chose to do so. The letter may not specify what action is being sought, the sources said.

The move to discipline Hatfield arose when the veteran Oregon lawmaker and political maverick cast the only Republican vote against the balanced budget amendment and it failed for the lack of one vote.

Shortly before the vote, Hatfield told Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) that he would resign from the Senate if that was what Dole wanted in order to assure passage of the amendment. Hatfield's resignation would have given the amendment 66 of 99 votes, precisely the two-thirds majority needed for passage. But Dole rejected the offer, the Kansas senator said Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation."

Dole said he had not decided whether Hatfield should be disciplined but disclosed that several senators wanted to look into the issue. One option was a move to depose Hatfield as Appropriations Committee chairman, an aide to one of the senators said.

Democrats, relishing the opportunity to capitalize on dissension among Republicans, immediately pounced on the move to discipline Hatfield.

White House press secretary Michael McCurry said the squabble is "evidence that there's increasingly no place in the Republican Party for those who are moderate." Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) said it was "awful" that a senator could be "chastised for putting principle over politics" in voting against the amendment.

Cochran said his staff's research showed that, while some Republican senators have been ousted from committee chairmanships, none lost their posts because of legislative votes, at least in this century. For instance, Sens. Robert LaFollette (Wis.) and Edwin F. Ladd (N.D.) lost their chairmanships in 1924, but the dispute involved LaFollette's campaign for president against a Republican and Ladd's support for LaFollette's candidacy, he said.

In 1925, the Republican conference adopted a resolution saying that no senator is bound by actions taken by the conference, Cochran added.

As for Hatfield, Cochran said senators are wary of setting precedents. "It puts everyone on notice that they could be subject to sanction too," he said.

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